

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-5401

February 7, 2013

The Honorable Eric K. Shinseki
Secretary
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary Shinseki:

I write to express my concern regarding the Department of Veterans Affairs' December 2012 decision to deny the San Juan VA Medical Center's bid to host the 2014 National Veterans Wheelchair Games in San Juan, Puerto Rico.

Puerto Rico's bid to host the Games was submitted to the VA in November 2011, with strong support from the Governor of Puerto Rico, my office, the Puerto Rico Olympic Committee, the Puerto Rico Paralympics Committee, the Puerto Rico Convention Bureau, and the Puerto Rico chapter of the Paralyzed Veterans of America, all of whom issued letters of endorsement.

I am advised that VA officials made two trips to San Juan, in March and June 2012, to assess the viability of the bid, making visits to athletic facilities, hotels, the convention center, and other sites. I understand that these visits left disabled veterans and other stakeholders in Puerto Rico with the distinct impression that formal VA approval of the bid was very likely to be forthcoming. When the VA (after considerable delay) rendered a negative decision in December, disabled veterans and other stakeholders in Puerto Rico were understandably confused and disappointed, especially given the enthusiasm with which they had submitted the bid, the various efforts they had undertaken in support of that bid, the uniformly positive feedback they had evidently received from VA officials, and the fact that no other bids to host the Games were under consideration by the VA at the time Puerto Rico's bid was denied. My constituents' frustration was heightened by what they perceived to be a failure on VA's part to provide them with sufficient notice of the denial, or a meaningful opportunity to address the VA's ostensible concerns.

The VA's stated reason for declining to support Puerto Rico's bid, as described to my office in an email, involve the "cost of logistics and travel bringing the event off the continental US [CONUS], especially in light of the new and very restrictive travel and conference regulations."

As far as I am aware, however, the VA has not provided evidence to support the suggestion that the cost of holding the Games in Puerto Rico would pose particular logistical challenges or cost

the VA more than other past or potential sites. It is difficult to believe that such evidence exists. San Juan is a highly-popular tourist destination, particularly for travelers of modest means. Many low-cost airlines fly to Puerto Rico, departing from scores of airports in the U.S. mainland, and the Island features thousands of inexpensive hotel rooms and eating establishments. Indeed, the Wheelchair Games were held in Puerto Rico in 1999 and I am told they were an unmitigated success.

With respect to the VA's "new travel and conference regulations," which I know were promulgated at least partly in response to congressional scrutiny of past VA actions, it is certainly both necessary and appropriate for the Department—like any federal agency—to ensure that it is acting as a responsible steward of taxpayer money and taking no action that is, or could be reasonably perceived as, excessive or unwarranted. However, it would be highly objectionable for the VA to interpret these regulations—or the congressional concerns that helped give rise to them—as operating to exclude certain U.S. destinations (like Puerto Rico) from consideration to host VA-sponsored events simply because they are OCONUS or happen to be attractive tourist destinations. I fear such thinking may have played a role in the VA's decision to deny Puerto Rico's bid.

As you know, the U.S. citizens of Puerto Rico have served and sacrificed in the U.S. armed forces side-by-side with their fellow citizens from the 50 states. The immense pride that veterans from Puerto Rico feel is clearly reflected in their desire to host their fellow veterans for these Games. Therefore, on their behalf, I respectfully ask that you reconsider your decision to deny Puerto Rico's bid to host the 2014 Wheelchair Games.

Sincerely,



Pedro R. Pierluisi
Member of Congress

cc: Christopher Nowak, Director, Office of National Veterans Sports Programs and Special Events, Department of Veterans Affairs
Dave Tostenrude, Director, National Veterans Wheelchair Games, Office of National Veterans Sports Programs and Special Events, Department of Veterans Affairs